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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 003531

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SUBJECT: ELECTION UPDATE - DEC 3, CLOSE OF POLLS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. While the Venezuelan presidential election was conducted December 3 without major incidents, both the Chavez and Rosales campaigns have access to widely varying exit polls. We do not place much faith in any of these polls at this point. The National Electoral Council (CNE) is expected to issue results when it has 80 percent of the returns, perhaps as early as 8:00 p.m. (local time, EST plus one hour). The Chavez camp claims it is set to win by at least twenty points, while the Rosales camp believes it is in a virtual tie with Chavez. The opposition has already put down markers regarding voting irregularities, and embassy observers identified scattered electoral problems in Caracas and in seven states. The CNE's decision today to limit international observers' and the opposition's access to its vote tabulation center will reduce public confidence in a Chavez declaration of victory. Ambassador and PolCouns have reached out to the OAS and EU EOMs to underline the importance of pressing this point. End Summary.

Voting Problems

¶2. (SBU) While there do not appear to have been widespread problems with the election, the Rosales campaign continues to complain about voting irregularities. The Rosales camp voiced concerns that the voting process has been deliberately slowed down in opposition strongholds, particularly through technical problems with equipment and the slow processing of fingerprints. The Rosales campaign claims that as of 1:30 some polling places in opposition areas in Miranda had still not opened. The campaign also remains concerned that some prospective Rosales voters received blank printed voter receipts. Adeco dissident Alfonso Marquina reported to the CNE that the indelible voting ink being used to avoid carousel voting is defective at many voting centers. Marquina noted that the ink at many centers can be wiped away readily with alcohol and is different than the ink that the Rosales camp audited and certified in the run-up to December 3 voting.

¶3. (SBU) While many polling stations did not open on time and many voters had to wait over three hours to vote, embassy observers report that voting lines were generally down considerably by late afternoon on December 3. Polls were slated to close at 4:00 p.m. local time, but the CNE giving polling centers with persons still in line permission to extend voting hours to 6:00 p.m.

Little Transparency at CNE Tabulation Center

¶4. (SBU) The CNE decided on December 3 "for lack of space" to limit the number of observers that can observe work at the CNE's tabulation center. We understand the OAS and EU both have been allotted one observer to go to the tabulation center and that they have been allowed to observe in short visits at the facilities. They are not allowed to stay there the entire time. We understand that the OAS EOM requested the CNE to accredit five observers for such work. The Carter Center was also planning to be present, but we understand that at this point they do not have accredited access. The Rosales camp had been allotted two accredited observers for the tabulation center, but we understand that they may also be limited to one. Ambassador and PolCouns contacted senior officials of both the OAS and EU EOM's and urged them to be more proactive in monitoring the CNE's tabulation of results, including by demanding additional observers at the center, if they believe that to be necessary.

Competing Exit Polls

¶5. (SBU) A wide variety of exit polls are circulating, indicating everything from a big Chavez win to a small Rosales lead. At this point, we cannot put much faith in any of these polls. The CNE reported that 5.5 million voters, over one-third of the registered electorate, voted by 1:30 p.m. The OAS estimated that 54 percent of registered voters voted by 3:00 p.m., based on CNE fingerprint data captures, and expected final voter turnout to be between 60 to 70 percent by 6:00 p.m. The opposition is passing to us exit polls results that show Rosales running quite close to Chavez. Senior Rosales aide Diego Arria told deskoff that the Rosales camp's exit poll numbers indicate that Rosales is

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down by only two percentage points. Another Rosales campaign aide told polassistant that by mid-afternoon Chavez had an estimated 3.1 million votes and Rosales had almost 2.9 million. The Rosales camp later reported exit polls showing Rosales in a "technical tie" or trailing Chavez by less than two percent. Both exit polls were based, however, on a methodology that assigned two-thirds of all persons not responding, 30 percent in this case, to Rosales.

¶6. (SBU) A Chavez campaign early exit poll, leaked while the polls were still open, gave Chavez a decisive lead with 60 percent of the vote. The Chavez campaign provided the OAS with a later exit poll that showed Chavez with 61 percent of the vote and Rosales with 35 percent of the vote. The OAS EOM also reportedly picked up an opposition exit poll showing Rosales trailing by 14 percent.

Embassy Observation

¶7. (SBU) Embassy's informal election observers reported a number of scattered irregularities this afternoon after visiting about 150 voting centers and receiving access to enter about half of them. Active duty National Guard personnel temporarily prevented one pair of election observers from departing a polling station in Vargas State, but permitted them to leave after the Embassy interceded. Election teams discovered three separate cases of voting machines being hooked up for transmission before the close of polls, a violation of CNE norms. Another team found evidence that fingerprint (digital scanning) machines were transmitting data.

¶8. (SBU) Other teams noted that fingerprint machines were deployed in disproportionate numbers in pro-Chavez areas,

making the voting process much quicker in those areas. In addition, our observers spotted Chavistas actively making their presence felt outside some voting centers, in some cases providing food and water to persons waiting in line, in other cases, riding en masse on motorcycles through numerous Caracas neighborhoods. Many teams confirmed isolated cases of Rosales voters complaining that their printed receipts were blank.

Foreign Minister Maduro

¶9. (U) Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro told state TV December 3 that the Chavez government is disposed to try to improve its relationship with the United States on the basis of "mutual respect." Asserting that Venezuela's relations with American civil society, including the U.S. Congress, have "never been better," Maduro blamed bilateral difficulties on an "elite" in the American government who want to "turn Venezuela into an American colony again" (sic). The BRV Foreign Minister suggested that a re-elected Chavez government would be open to taking the initial steps to improve dialogue between the BRV and the United States so long as U.S. officials respect "the strength of the Bolivarian revolution." State TV called Venezuelan Ambassador to the U.S. Alvarez who reported voting was going well in Venezuela's eight U.S. consulates.

OAS Press Release

¶10. (U) The OAS Election Observation Mission issued a December 3 press release at 3:00 p.m. stating that by 9:00 a.m., 98 percent of the centers OAS observers had visited had begun voting, and there were poll watchers ("testigos") in 93 percent of these same centers. TO OAS EOM also reported that the electoral register was available for public consultation in 96 percent of the polling stations visited and 71 percent of the voting tables were being managed by the principal members (not substitutes).

Canadian Woes

¶11. (SBU) After withdrawing an offer to include local Canadian diplomatic personnel in the OAS Election Observation Mission, OAS EOM Chief Fischer added one Ottawa-based diplomat to the OAS EOM with the promise of getting CNE credentials for three other Canadian diplomats on December 3. The CNE, however, denied all three the promised credentials at 1:00 p.m. local time, apparently because the OAS decided

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not to include them on their mission as promised. Embassy and Department contacts with Canadian diplomats derailed Fischer's ploy of claiming that we insisted that he not include the Canadians.

BROWNFIELD